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NEW SPECIES OF THE MONTH: THE VU QUANG ORYX

Cryptozoologists are always happy with a new animal discovery, however small and insignificant the creature involved may be. So they were absolutely thrilled when, in 1992, a World Wildlife Fund team reported a large and bizarre-looking mammal from a remote region of Vietnam along the Laotian border.

The Vu Quang oryx is not technically an oryx. In fact, Dr. Jack MacKinnon and his Vietnamese counterparts had a hard time deciding just what they had their hands on. Local hunters called it the "forest goat" or "mountain goat" (it migrated seasonally between the two locales). Working initially from just the long-horned skulls, MacKinnon thought the animal might be related to the anoa, a dwarf buffalo.

Even now, the Vu Quang oryx's taxonomic relationships are a bit uncertain. It's been given its own genus and christened Pseudoryx nghetinhensis. DNA analysis places it near the base of the bovid family. Its closest relatives appear to be the oxen.

The animals apparently travel in mini-herds of two or three. An adult is about three feet high at the shoulder and may weigh 200 pounds, although scientists have yet to see the creature alive or study a whole, fresh carcass. The oryx's body is reddish brown or dark brown, with a darker stripe running down the back. A variety of white stripes and patches adorn the head.

The finding of a new large mammal is the rarest and most celebrated event in zoology. (New members of Asia's muntjac, or "barking deer" genus, were identified in 1982 and 1988, and a new gazelle in 1985.) There are perhaps a few hundred examples of the newest find in the Vu Quang Nature Reserve. Let us hope that governments and conservationists can protect this stunning discovery.

Sources: Van Dung, Vu, et. al., 1993. "A new species of living bovid from Vietnam," Nature, June 3, p.443: Anonymous. 1989. "New Species of Deer in China," Oryx, No. 2: Groves, Colin P., and Douglas Lay. 1985. "A new species of the genus Gazella from the Arabian peninsula," Mammalia, Vol. 49, No. 1.

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO...THE THYLACINE

The marsupials which dominate the Australian region don't form a complete food chain: there are no large marsupial predators. The reason is that we humans have seemingly wiped out the thylacine.

Also called the Tasmanian wolf or tiger, the thylacine resembled a slender, dark-striped greyhound. It roamed Australia and Tasmania for thousands of years until humans came. In Australia, feral dogs gave rise to the dingo, which crowded out the thylacine sometime before the Christian era. On Tasmania, it thrived until sheep farmers placed a bounty on its head. The last wild kill officially recorded was in 1931, and a lonely zoo specimen died in 1936.

It is reasonable to assume there were at least a few stragglers. But does the species still survive? Eric Guiler, former head of Tasmania's wildlife protection board, thinks it does. He cites 64 sightings since 1936, plus footprints, calls, and kills showing the thylacine's distinctive habit of eating only the internal organs.

Events heated up in 1961 when hunters reportedly killed a male thylacine. According to Guiler, the body was apparently dumped at sea when attempts to dispose of the illegally possessed carcass for profit failed. Interest rose again in 1982, when a Tasmanian park ranger reported seeing a thylacine in his vehicle's headlights.

The possibility of survival on the Australian mainland was raised in 1984, when tracker Kevin Cameron photographed the rear view of a thylacine in Western Australia. Not everyone accepts Cameron's pictures as authentic, but they certainly created a stir.

Will zoologists rediscover the thylacine? Definitive proof of the animal's existence remains elusive. What evidence we do have is just enough, perhaps, to give us hope.

Sources: Guiler, Eric R. 1985. Thylacine: The Tragedy of the Tasmanian Tiger. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Douglas, Athol M. 1986. "Tigers in Western Australia," New Scientist, April 24.

UNCLASSIFIED: THE ONZA

According to local reports going back to the Spanish conquest, western Mexico's remote Sierra Madre Occidental region is home to three big cats: the puma, the jaguar, and the cheetah-like "onza."

In 1937, Dale Lee, a hunting guide who had shot some 500 pumas, and client Joseph Shirk bagged a strange feline. Lee wrote that the slender, long-eared animal "differs from any member of the cat tribe I ever saw." J. B. Tinsley, in his 1987 book The Puma, reproduced photos of this cat and a similar one killed in 1926. Shirk kept his trophy's skull, the first hard evidence of the onza.

THE ONZA (Cont.)

One animal, of course, can always be a freak, and the onza remained confined to folklore until 1985. Then a Mexican rancher shot an odd-looking cat and was curious enough to preserve and report it. Prominent mammologist and puma expert Dr. Troy Best, along with zoologist J. Richard Greenwell, was soon dissecting the find.

The onza looked basically like a puma built along cheetah lines. The legs were abnormally long, the body very slender. While healthy and well-fed, the adult female specimen weighed under 60 pounds. The ears were unusually long, and there were unique dark horizontal stripes on the insides of the front legs.

Greenwell and Best believe the evidence - the 1985 specimen, the Shirk skull, and two more skulls which have surfaced - indicates a new puma subspecies. If so, it would easily be the most distinctive of the seemingly limitless number of subspecies proposed for Felis concolor at one time or another. Most such cats have been distinguished by minor differences in morphology or coloration.

What is needed now are more specimens, preferably live ones, to establish that this is a unique breeding population. If not, the onza may be only a recurring genetic abnormality, like the striped "king" cheetah. One problem, according to Dr. Best, is that there are few panther specimens from this region to compare the onza with. Whatever it turns out to be, cryptozoologists can take heart that one "mythical" animal is now a reality.

Sources: Best, Troy. 1993. Telephone interview, January 15.
Greenwell, J. Richard. 1992. Telephone interview, July 7.
Tinsley, Jim Bob. 1987. The Puma. El Paso: Texas Western Press.
Marshall, Richard. 1961. The Onza. New York: Exposition Press.
Thanks to Dr. Best and Mr. Greenwell for their time.

NEWS AND COMMENT

An important **primate rediscovery** occurred in 1992. The Tonkin snub-nosed monkey (Rhinopithecus avunculus), presumed extinct for ten years, was found in Vietnam during an IUCN/WWF survey. Ardith Eudey and Roland Wirth of the IUCN's Primate Specialist Group are concerned the unprotected species will soon be hunted to permanent extinction. (Oryx, Vol. 26, No.4).

Are we studying the coelacanth to death? Latimeria chalumnae is certainly not a common fish. Since its discovery in 1938, this prehistoric holdout has been avidly pursued. Modern technology has yielded a recent annual catch rate 3-5 times higher than the historical take by local fishermen. (Thomson, Keith S. 1991. Living Fossil. For complete citation, see review below.)

"It jeers at fish unfossilized
At intellectual snobs elite;
Old Coelacanth, so unrevised,
It doesn't know it's obsolete."

- Odgen Nash

Speaking of the coelacanth, **there remains a mystery concerning this fish.** In Science News Letter for January 17, 1953, is a report from Dr. Isaac Ginsburg, an ichthyologist who received a strange fish scale from a curio shop owner in Florida. Ginsburg believed the scale was from a coelacanth or an unclassified relative, yet it came from the Gulf of Mexico. The fisherman who sold the scales to the curio shop was never found. What fish carried that scale?

It has been estimated that **only half the fish in the seas have been catalogued.** There are new ones to be found in fresh water, too. Just one issue of the quarterly journal Copeia (1993, No. 3) includes a total of 17 new species from both environments.

USA Today reports that a tour company is offering **trips into Loch Ness by submersible.** Will they tell less-knowledgeable tourists in advance that visibility in the peat-stained loch is practically nil? **Comment:** Given these water conditions, the fish-eating mammal hypothesized by Sir Peter Scott and other investigators must use sonar. A hydrophone survey on frequencies encompassing the sonar of all known marine mammals might prove/disprove this theory.

Finally, science still lacks a specimen of an **unclassified black-and-white tree kangaroo** photographed in Indonesia in 1992. It appears that Scott's tree kangaroo, described in 1985, did not complete our list of these marsupials. (Hutchins, Michael, and Barbara Sleeper. 1993. "Out on a Limb," Animals, Nov/Dec, p.8.)

RESOURCES:

BOOKS.

Domico, Terry. 1993. **Kangaroos: the Marvelous Mob.** New York: Facts on File. Beautifully illustrated and thoroughly researched study of these charming creatures. Domico describes all the kangaroos, mini-kangaroos, tree kangaroos, etc., including types discovered only recently and several which were declared extinct but rediscovered. An appendix lists all the species covered.

Thomson, Keith S. 1991. **Living Fossil: The Story of the Coelacanth.** New York: W. W. Norton. In the most complete study to date, Thomson covers the discovery, physiology, and classification of this fish in a thorough and readable fashion. He examines (and doubts) claims for a Mediterranean population, but does not address the possible American coelacanth (see News and Comment, above).